

FORT, FRANKLIN W.

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Speeches Honoring Abraham Lincoln

Franklin W. Fort

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Speech of Congressman Franklin W. Fort,
at Greensboro, North Carolina
on February 12, 1931.

We meet tonight to commemorate the 122nd anniversary of the birth of Abraham Lincoln. Despite the efforts of occasional sensation seeking speakers and writers, Lincoln has definitely gone down into history as one of the greatest men the world has yet produced. Wells, the great English author, lists him as one of the five greatest figures in the world's history. There must be some reason for the public opinion which lists a figure upon so high a pedestal. To me the reason is clear in the case of Lincoln.

There are always two sides to any historical personage, the figure of the man and the figure of the statesman. There are figures which loom great in history as statesmen and attract admiration for their achievements, whose human side leaves us cold or even sometimes, as with Napoleon, repels. In Lincoln, however, the man appeals quite as much as the statesman gains our admiration. It seems to me that this is true because both his main achievement as a statesman and the lasting quality of that achievement are due primarily to his possession in a supreme degree of homely human qualities.

The supreme achievement of Lincoln as a statesman, during his life, was the preservation of our national unity by force of arms. The supreme achievement of Lincoln as an historical figure is that he so conducted the force needed to restore national unity as to make that unity genuine sixty years after his death with the rancor and bitterness of war largely forgotten in the fraternal feeling of the American people.

The South would quickly have rallied from the shock of the Civil War if it had not been for the reconstruction days which followed, and history has shown with increasing clarity that reconstruction would have been a far different thing if Lincoln had lived. His human qualities and broad viewpoint would have avoided many, if not most, of the evils of the period. There was nothing sectional, nothing bitter, nothing partisan or intolerant in the viewpoint of Lincoln toward the South. He was not so much against the Confederacy; he was for the Union. He sought victory for the cause he favored; not defeat for its enemies. With clear vision he knew that the South would gain materially as well as spiritually from the abolition of slavery and the continuance of the Union, and he sought success for the benefit of all; not of a part. It is because this is true and is felt to be true in the South that tonight I, as a Northerner, am invited into North Carolina to join in a tribute to his memory.

And yet during his lifetime he was assailed with a bitterness and a malice almost unequalled. He was made the butt of ridicule, accused of cowardice in the North and of unfairness in the South. The joy that might have been his in public service was destroyed by the loose tongue of slander. Somehow this seems always the fate of those whose service is the most unselfish -- of those who refuse to be tempted by bitterness into retort. By some perversity of human nature, we revile and ridicule our gentlest and kindest men during their lifetime and hold their virtue up to our children after their death, overlooking that only the most supreme courage can stand its ground under the lash of criticism.

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Today we are repeating in the case of President Hoover much of our national misconduct in regard to President Lincoln. Shy, sensitive as a child, cut to the heart by that unfair criticism which refuses due credit for the finest and noblest of motives, President Hoover is the victim of the same type of yelping attack which tore the heart of Lincoln. And yet, with that same fine courage which kept our first Republican President on the course he had marked out as best for the nation, President Hoover, no matter how vicious the attacks may be, yet presses on unceasingly toward the ends he seeks to achieve, which ends are the ultimate happiness and prosperity of the American people, and particularly the future of our children.

Why should the present administration be so bitterly assailed? It can not be for non-fulfillment of promises. All my life I have been a student of political government and I venture the assertion that no party's platform has been so quickly fulfilled as the platform of the Republican platform adopted in Kansas City in 1928. We promised an upward revision of the tariff. The House, with its overwhelming Republican majority, passed an adequate and proper Tariff Bill within three months of President Hoover's inauguration. The Senate bickered over it for eighteen months, delaying and hampering business with uncertainty and finally passed not so good a bill as had passed the House. But in the Senate the Republican party was only in nominal control; actual control was held by the Democratic Party plus a bloc of so-called Insurgent Republicans who refused allegiance to the administration or the party. Today the bill is attacked in general terms by our opponents; but have you ever heard one name a schedule in the entire bill that he would rewrite and name the rates he would suggest? Of course,

in any bill containing ten thousand items men and sections differ as to the propriety of one or the other item, but I noticed that the Democratic Senators from the South voted for every high rate on products produced in their states, and so did the Republican Insurgents in the West. North Carolina was highly favored in the drafting of this legislation. Perhaps you did not get all you wanted -- but neither did we in New Jersey. Incidentally, there is no slightest question but that the services of Congressman Jonas and Congressman Pritchard were of enormous value to your state in the drafting of this legislation. I know they hounded me and other Republican members day after day on matters of importance to your state, and most of them they got because of their persistency and the clear way in which they presented the reasons and the need to each industry of the duties they sought. They will be missed in Washington in the next Congress.

Then we promised the establishment of a Farm Board with ample funds for the relief of agriculture. Our platform was perfectly clear that the nature of the relief would be the assistance of organizations in the industry, in order that it might compete on terms of equality with the various great organized industries of the nation. Well, we created a Board as able in its personnel under the brilliant leadership of Alexander Legge as any Board ever created in the government -- an abler group than many Cabinets of many Presidents. We gave them one-half billion dollars to be used in organizing and financing co-operative associations, realizing that only through joint effort could the six million farmers match the power of the highly organized buyers of industries and chain store groups. In wheat, as a result of their

efforts and the tariff, the price has been for months 25¢ a bushel above the price across the Canadian border at Winnipeg. In wool, they have so increased the power of cooperatives that this year they handled 125 million pounds of American wool out of 315 million pounds, as against 25 or 30 million pounds a year ago, and maintained a staple price despite complete collapse in the Australian and London wool markets. Cotton prices are bad, but if it had not been for the lifting of one million bales or more of cotton with Farm Board funds the price would have descended below any level in history. We kept our promise here as in the case of Tariff.

We promised a further reduction in taxes. We gave it. This reduction, together with the previous reductions since the Republican Party took control in 1921, amount to a total saving to the American people of over two billion of dollars a year below the figure that would have been paid their Government if it had not been for the successive reductions in rates under Republican administration. The effect of this on the average man is clearer when you realize that the cost of living has gone down in practically every item except rents throughout the country in these ten years -- and rents are the one item on which local taxes have a greater influence than federal taxes. State and local taxes have gone up and rents have gone up with them. Federal taxes have gone down and all of the rest of the items in the family budget have gone down with them. Along with this great reduction in taxation, we have cut the national debt by over eight billion dollars in ten years, or approximately one third. The resulting interest saving alone is over one million and a quarter a day to the American people. And yet we have done all this at the same time that we have enormously increased our appropriations for the construction of highway

and public buildings, veterans' hospitals and various other forms of development and assistance to our states and our people. Do you realize that now, eleven years after the war, we are appropriating for veterans' activities of one sort or another 865 million dollars out of total expenditures for all the purposes of the government, including the payment of interest and principal of our debt, of four billion, six hundred million? In other words, in this same ten-year period when we have so tremendously reduced taxation and debt, we have increased our expenditures for veterans to the point where they now are 20% of our total revenues from all sources.

And then we promised the American people efforts toward peace. Well, the London Naval Conference of 1930 was initiated entirely by President Hoover, although with his customary modesty and in order to promote its success it was so handled as to give to that great Premier of Great Britain, Ramsey MacDonald, the chief credit and the leading part. That Treaty marks an enormous forward step both toward world peace and the reduced cost of armaments, which must be paid from taxation.

And all this great record of achievement has been accomplished through a period of unprecedented depression in industry. Some unthinking people blame the depression upon the administration and sigh for the return to the boom conditions that existed when President Hoover was inaugurated. They completely overlook that in economics as in everything else whatever goes up must come down. The evil which a depression marks is always the boom that preceded it, and in order to find the cause of a depression, therefore, one must study the nature and the causes of the boom.

From 1921 to 1929 fundamental movements went on in our business life which were new and revolutionary. There was first the enormous expansion in the use of machinery to displace men. Through inventive genius in many industries the necessary human labor was cut in half or more. Then hand in hand with this went an equally great development of the use of advertising to produce the sale of goods. This stimulation of sales was absolutely necessary if we were to build up an increased volume of sales to afford productive usefulness for the men dismissed from employment by machinery. Simultaneously and due in large part to advertising our merchandising methods were remade. And the chain store with its accompaniment of cash business instead of credit in the necessities of life began to spread over the whole nation, supplementing in many cases the old-time local merchant and rendering unnecessary through their consolidated buying power the services of thousands upon thousands of old-time travelling salesmen and other middle men. Along with these developments in industry and merchandising, agriculture, particularly in the staple products like wheat and cotton, was met with a new kind of competition, due to the opening of new lands both here and abroad where virgin soil and mechanical cultivation could produce bumper crops with far lower cost than our older lands could match. Through this period we were aided by the development of one or two new industries such as automobiles and radios, which acquired a volume of production and sale which took up a large part of the men discharged from other industries by machinery; and by the greatly enlarged development of old industries such as insurance, telephone, amusements, and other like services which absorbed substantial numbers of our wage earners.

Hand in hand with all this went a new theory of wages which gave to labor a far larger share of the profits of its work than it had previously received. The mounting wage scale injured agriculture in the staple crops by making the expense of raising them much higher, but at the same time greatly helped the diversification of products by creating far broader markets for dairy products, fresh vegetables and other things that had previously been in the luxury class. This high wage scale made possible something which was a complete reversal of all previously held sound economic theories. The world had always bought on credit and luxuries only when it could pay cash. We created installment buying based on high wages for luxuries and at the same time began buying our necessities from the chain stores for cash. Through it all we tried to operate on a banking structure which could not keep pace with the rapid organization of industry and merchandising and the equally rapid shifts in agriculture. Too many of our communities failed to realize that modern business and agriculture required large banks. Then on top of it all, as is human nature, we piled an enormous speculation in land, securities and commodities based on the thought that we could keep on making paper profits and live on them.

Into the middle of this house of cards which we and the people of other nations of the world were creating, the Senate injected the prolonged delay of tariff legislation with a resulting disturbance of business conditions both here and abroad. Here, because producers could not lay out an intelligent forward program with tariff rates unsettled, and abroad because no one knew how much of the American market he would be able to reach when our new tariff passed. Along with this revolution began in China and

India, constituting more than one-fourth of the buying population of the world, and this was followed by a complete collapse in the price of silver, which is the form of money used in those nations. Incidentally, the effect of this collapse on the whole world is proof beyond controversy of what the Republican Party saved the nation in 1896 by opposing the silver standard here. Following on the collapse of the purchasing power of India and China, first England and then the rest of Europe lost its buying power and our exports were reduced to a minimum. Naturally the bottom dropped out of the speculative boom. Paper profits were transferred into tremendous cash losses and our people in great numbers found themselves saddled with debt for installment purchases and with the means with which they had hoped to pay for them gone with the collapse of speculative profits. On this followed naturally the failure of many of our weaker banks and some of our strong ones. Confidence of the people was shaken and their purchases stopped even in those cases where their income had continued. But it must not be forgotten that the income of 80% of the American people today is certainly, in terms of its buying power for commodities at present reduced prices, as great as, or greater than, it was in 1929.

On top of it all came an unprecedented drought and considerable storm and flood damage in other sections. Of course, being human, we like to blame all this on the government. But I doubt seriously whether the sound judgment of the American people will blame the Hoover administration for the 18 months delay in the Senate on the Tariff Bill, for the revolts in China and India, for the resultant collapse of silver and Europe's buying power, for the drought, the storms and the flood.

There are some good features which the depression has produced. In the first place, people are paying their debts -- an excellent proof, by the way, of the essential soundness of our structure. Relatively few automobiles and radios, washingmachines and electric refrigerators have gone back to the company which sold them. In addition, savings deposits throughout the country as a whole have increased, despite the drafts on savings accounts of those who are unemployed and despite the shaking of confidence in banks in many sections of the country. Obviously, the people are working their way out through thrift, which alone can compensate for a buying spree.

In all this the government has aided in part by a great expansion in its appropriations for roads and other public works - necessarily slow in showing its effect because of need of engineering and architectural services and the acquisition of land but ultimately certain to show results. Then the Farm Board, as I have said, has done much to hold up the prices of agricultural products against speculative decline which normally would have been added to the decline from mere reduction of demand. Further, we are helping the rehabilitation of agriculture with loans of forty-five million dollars for seed and fertilizer in the sections which suffered from drought and storm. Government finances have been managed with unusual skill under that great Secretary of the Treasury, Andrew Mellon, and we have thus far been able to avoid an increase in taxes as a result. Finally, through the vision and foresight of the President, wage levels throughout the nation have generally been maintained at pre-depression standards. Never before, here or abroad, has a period of depression and unemployment failed to produce tremendous cuts in wages. Today most men and women who are still employed are getting substantially as much as they received two years ago. Only in this way have our

people been able to pay off their debts on installment purchases and to increase their savings. Only in this way has employment been maintained in any volume whatever in industries like the automobile and the radio and the gas filling station. I believe that history will record as one of the great economic achievements of all time the success of the President, with the co-operation of our great industrial and railroad leaders, in maintaining the wage levels of America through a very drastic depression.

While this has all been going on the activities of the government have been continually hampered and threatened by sectional, partisan or group activities. Just as Lincoln found the fact to be, so it is today. This nation cannot progress by preferring one section or one group over other sections and other groups. Nor can intelligent and thoughtful statesmen achieve results if hampered by partisan narrowness and attacked by partisan bitterness. The Representatives from some sections and groups have insisted on advancing absurd and insane plans for alleged farm relief. The country owes a debt of gratitude to those great leaders of farm organizations like Louis J. Taber of the National Grange, and Samuel Thompson of the American Farm Bureau Federation, who fight any interference with the existing Farm Board and the laws under which it operates. Certain it is to any thinking man that the adoption for instance of the Export Debenture plan would promote the final collapse both of agriculture and of industry. Plans are daily advanced to deprive the States of their individuality by having the Federal Government take over more and more the activities which are local in character. Plans are daily advanced to have the Federal Government take over the operation of private business and of late we have even been urged to supplant the fine generosity of the American people in aiding

their fellow citizens, by tax raised doles. President Hoover needs no recommendation to the American people as the possessor of human sympathy boundless in the scope of its caring for all who are in distress or want. He has given to the world the finest examples in its entire history of the organization and management of relief activities, and everyone of them has been operated by volunteer organization on funds voluntarily subscribed by the American people, except where war had so destroyed the very organization of nations that only the funds of our government could match the emergency. Today when the Red Cross, with its superb record of unfailing success in the alleviation of distress is seeking to raise funds from the always generous purse of the American people for the assistance of their own fellow-citizens whom Nature has oppressed, the President is attacked with bitterness unexcelled as the enemy of starving women and children. Why? Just because he knows as does every thinking man that a large part of the present economic collapse of Europe is due to a reliance of people upon the government and upon taxation for food and the necessities of life. Just because he knows that nothing is more destructive to initiative and self-reliance than a willingness to rest upon the arm of the government. Just because he knows that nothing will so certainly destroy and weaken the fine spiritual impulses of the American people as to take away from them the opportunity and the privilege of helping their fellow-men. Consciously or unconsciously those who advance the substitution of the government with tax raised funds for the volunteer effort of the American people, are urging upon our nation the greatest step yet threatened toward the Bolshevistic ideal of government as both the master and the support of the people.

And our rescue from depression is further threatened by the pressure for the payment of soldiers' bonuses in cash at this time. The credit facilities of the nation cannot stand the strain just now - before they have rallied from all the shocks of depression, - of floatation of an issue of even one-half billion dollars of government bonds for this purpose. Nor could industry recover in the face of threatened tax increase. The fact is being overlooked that the adjusted compensation certificates are in hundreds and thousands of cases the only insurance which many veterans carry for their wives and children. The fact is being overlooked that the further substantial increase in government costs which the present payment on these certificates will cause cannot but react upon the otherwise necessary expenditures of the government in the aid of the disabled. The fact is being overlooked that any movement which slows up business, as the present payment of these certificates will undoubtedly do, cannot but increase the unemployment, which must react on veterans and non-veterans alike. Possibly some increase in the borrowing value of the certificates may be warranted for the benefit of those men who are today unemployed, but any proposal which looks toward the retirement of the certificates or offers equal advantages to the man who is not in need that it offers to the man in need will react inevitably upon the whole people of the nation, including the veterans themselves.

For all these troubles I have but a single remedy to offer. It is a return to our original fundamental government structure -- a return to majority rule without blocs, sectional or group. This can be achieved only by a return to the full vigor of the two-party system of government. America cannot exist as can the nations of Europe on a system containing more than two parties or one where the two parties are not strictly aligned. This is

This is because our officers are elected for fixed terms, while in Europe the Premiers and the Parliament go out of office and a new election is held whenever there ceased to be a real majority in either house of their Parliament. You men here are entitled to great credit for your courage and persistency in standing by your party allegiance in a state where success has been so infrequent. May I give you hope and confidence from the experience of the Republican party in my own state of New Jersey. New Jersey never went Republican for President until 1896. We have never given a majority to a Democrat for President since, although President Wilson carried the state in 1912 by virtue of Republican division. You here have held the line for 60 years in the face of discouragement and repeated defeat. It takes far more courage and sincerity of conviction than it does in the state which never has gone Democratic. Now that you have achieved under fine leadership your initial success we are very hopeful that this great state, like my own, may prove to have given its last majority to a Democrat for President. And if you can do this you will have contributed greatly to the upbuilding of that sense of party responsibility and party loyalty which is the necessary pre-requisite to the abolition of government by blocs, to the defeat of government in the interest of sections, and to that type of consideration of public questions which was Lincoln's -- namely, that all problems are national and none sectional.

As we sit here tonight we can justly urge our friends to join our party. We can do it with pride in its past, with pride in its present, and with confidence in its future.

We have given the Nation the leadership for. of Lincoln for

our greatest time of internal travail. We have given to it the leadership of McKinley to help heal the wounds of the Civil War. We have given it the leadership of Roosevelt to teach those who grasp for power that the Nation is greater than any man or group of men. We have given it the leadership of Coolidge to reaffirm the confidence of the people in the honesty of their Government and to produce economy and efficiency in the administration of its affairs. And now we have given it, for the period when the most perplexing of economic problems press for solution, the best-trained economic mind that ever came to the chair, in the man who never failed -- Herbert Hoover.

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